The Jus Semper Global Alliance

In Pursuit of the People and Planet Paradigm

Sustainable Human Development

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The End of the Megamachine: The History of a Civilisation on the Brink of Collapse

Excerpt from the books preface

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On January 25, 2017, a few days after Donald Trump took office as President of the United States, two significant events coincided. Amidst the frenzied cheers of traders and shareholders, the Dow Jones index reached the 20,000-point threshold for the first time in history. On the same day, the hands of the so-called "doomsday clock" moved to two and a half minutes to midnight. It was the closest they had been since 1953, when the first hydrogen bombs were detonated. The clock reflects the assessments of leading scientists of the imminent dangers of nuclear war, environmental destruction and high-risk technologies. Since 2025, there are only 89 seconds left. The ecstasy of shareholders and the proximity of midnight for humanity: it is difficult to express more clearly that our current economic system is on a course of imminent collision with the Earth and its inhabitants. The jubilation of the stock market is our downfall.

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We are currently witnessing how an entire planet, which took four billion years to evolve, is being destroyed by a global economic machine that produces enormous quantities of goods and, at the same time, enormous quantities of waste, exorbitant wealth for a few, and massive impoverishment, senseless idleness, and permanent overwork. If an alien were to visit us, they would obviously think this system is crazy. And yet, it is not without a certain rationality. The hard core of this rationality consists of the endless multiplication of columns of numbers in the accounts of a relatively small group

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of people: today, 26 men own as much as the poorest half of the world's population. Absurdly increasing the fortunes of a small and powerful caste of super-rich individuals seems to be the only goal left for the global Megamachine. The Earth is being devastated by such ever-growing figures of wealth.

Deep down, everyone knows about the destructive power of this system, which is sick and makes us sick. In Germany, for example, according to polls, 88 per cent of those surveyed would like a different economic system. In Britain and the United States, too, acceptance of the capitalist economy is rapidly declining, especially among younger generations. Gone are the days of jubilation over progress and market euphoria. Almost everyone I have spoken to over the past ten years—whether conservative, left-wing, environmentalist, young or old—no longer believes in the future of the system when they are honest and take off their professional masks. At the same time, however, there is a prevailing sense of distressing uncertainty. The gears, though obviously destructive, seem unstoppable. After decades of failed climate negotiations that were unable to achieve binding reduction targets, fruitless conferences on world hunger, and, at best, only cosmetic repairs to the outrageous global financial system, almost no one trusts governments to reverse the global trend. Although with each passing day, knowledge about the disastrous consequences of 'business as usual' increases, the 'captains' of the Megamachine are steaming full speed ahead toward the inevitable collision.

This is even stranger when alternatives exist, which some people choose to ignore. Almost every aspect of our society and economy could be organised in a completely different way. For example, in just a few years, all agriculture on the planet could become organic, thus saving a considerable amount of greenhouse gas emissions; a monetary system geared towards the common good could replace the current financial casino; and for decades there have been concepts of decentralised renewable energy, intelligent public transport systems, an equitable division of labor, and regional economic cycles. All this would be possible if... If what? Who or what is blocking these possibilities, and for what purpose? Why is a civilisation that presents itself to the world as the bearer of reason and progress incapable of changing course to get off an evidently suicidal path?

My approach is to answer these questions by telling a story. When we cannot explain someone's behaviour, when we think they are crazy, it sometimes helps to tell their story. People rarely do anything without reason. Although such reasons are often not found in the present, they are often found in the past, where the patterns of this behaviour have been forged. Only those who know their own story can change it. The same is true of social systems, which are composed of people.

The myths of modernity

The blame for having set ourselves on a deadly path is often attributed to the triumph of neoliberal policies, which in recent decades have exacerbated social inequality and destroyed the environment. However, the causes run much deeper; neoliberalism is the latest phase of a much older system that, since its inception some 500 years ago, has been based on predation. This book addresses the history and prehistory of this lethal system, which has spread across the planet in an unprecedented expansionary movement and is now reaching its limits.

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This story can be viewed in many different ways. The standard version—the myth of Western civilisation—tells of a process of progress achieved through hard work which, despite all adversities and setbacks, has ultimately led to greater prosperity, peace, knowledge, culture and freedom. In this version, wars, environmental destruction and genocides are seen as slips, relapses, setbacks or undesirable side effects of what is, on the whole, a beneficial process towards an increasingly civilised society.

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Every society cultivates its own myth that underpins and justifies its specific order. However, the problem with these myths is that they not only give us a distorted view of the past but also diminish our ability to make the right decisions in the future. Suppose I believe that I have been walking along the right path for a long time, one that will eventually lead me to flourishing landscapes. In that case, I will continue along it, even if the road becomes increasingly rough, the devastation around me increases, and I run out of water supplies. But inevitably, there comes a point when I wonder if my maps are correct, if I have interpreted them correctly, and if it is possible that this is not the right path. This is the point we find ourselves at today. Widespread confusion can lead to a turning point where we must stop and scrutinise the maps with a critical eye, redrawing them where they were evidently wrong and redefining our own situation.

Reorientation begins with a change of perspective. From the perspective of history's victors, who are often the ones who write the history books, the saga of progress makes perfect sense. For example, as I write these lines, I am sitting in a heated room, sipping coffee, gazing out the window and watching the leaves fall from the trees in autumn while my daughter plays in a nice nursery around the corner. Everything seems to be going well in the world, at least in the small portion of time and space that I can encompass at this moment.

But as soon as I broaden my perspective and change my focus, a completely different view emerges. For example, the security guard in Iraq who watches over the pipeline that carries the diesel fuel for my heating and who lost half his family in the war sees a different part of the world and has lived a different story; and the triumph of the system in question has a very different meaning for him. The same is true of the peasant woman who grows coffee in Guatemala or the worker in a coltan mine in the Congo who extracts minerals from the earth, without which my computer would not work. Although I do not know them, I am connected to all these people; and if I want to tell a realistic story about the system in which I live, I must also tell their stories and those of their ancestors. In other words, I must step outside my protective bubble and see the world through the eyes of people whose voices are often drowned out by the megaphones of power.

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From this other perspective, the expansion of the last 500 years, starting in Europe, reveals itself as a history that, for most of humanity, has been associated from the outset with displacement, impoverishment, mass violence—even genocide—and environmental destruction. This violence is not a thing of the past, nor is it a 'childhood

disease' of the system, but rather one of its permanent structural components. Today, this is evidenced by the imminent destruction of the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people caused by worsening climate chaos.

The Megamachine

But on what basis can we generally assert that this is a global system, rather than merely a set of institutions, ideologies, and practices? A system is more than the sum of its parts; it is a functional structure in which all components depend on each other and cannot exist independently. It is obvious that there is a global financial system, a global energy system and a system of international division of labour, and that these systems are in turn closely interconnected. However, these economic structures cannot function autonomously. They depend on the existence of states capable of enforcing certain property rights, providing infrastructure, defending trade routes militarily, absorbing economic losses and keeping resistance to the impositions and injustices of the system under control. Militarised states and markets are not two opposites; rather, they have co-evolved and are now intrinsically linked. The popular contrast between the state and the "free market" is a fiction that has nothing to do with historical reality.

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In addition to economic and state structures, there is a third fundamental pillar, which is ideological in nature. The violent expansion of the system and the injustices it inevitably produces were justified from the outset on the grounds that the "West" was carrying out a historic mission that would bring salvation to the world. If at first it was the Christian religion that justified this claim, later it was "reason" and "civilisation", "development", the "free market" and "Western values", supposedly superior, that took its place. Schools, universities, the media, and other ideologically influential institutions formed during the modern era, in close relationship with the apparatus of military and economic power, played a decisive role in the elaboration and dissemination of this mythology. However, there were always important emancipation movements that grew within it.

The interaction between these three spheres of power, as part of a global social system, has been analysed extensively since the 1970s by the social scientist Immanuel Wallerstein among others. Wallerstein calls this functional structure the "modern world-system". I use the metaphorical term "Megamachine", which dates back to the historian Lewis Mumford (1895-1990). "Machine" here does not mean a technical device; rather, it refers to a social organisational mechanism that seems to function like a machine. I say "seems" explicitly, because despite all the systemic limitations, the machinery is ultimately made up of people who reproduce it every day and who therefore — at least under certain conditions — could also stop doing so.

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The limits of the system

In the 21st century, the Megamachine will encounter two limits that, when combined, prove insurmountable. The first limit is inherent in the system: for some four decades now, the global economy has been heading towards a structural crisis that can no longer be explained by the usual economic cycles. This crisis is only concealed by the ever-increasing indebtedness of all actors, by financial bubbles that burst into ever-deepening economic crashes (see Chapter 10). At the same time, the system offers a secure livelihood to fewer and fewer people. The world's 200 largest companies account for 25 per cent of global social product, but employ only 0.75 per cent of the

world's population. An increasing proportion of humanity is being left out of the economic system, not only on the periphery, but also in the centres of accumulation. The decline of the middle classes and the ruin of the countries of southern Europe are some of the most recent examples of this. This structural crisis is not solely due to failed economic policy, but is the result of contradictions within the system as a whole that are difficult to resolve. This is accompanied by the transformation of many states, which, after a relatively brief interlude as welfare states, tend to revert to the repressive military and police organisations they were in earlier phases of the system. Furthermore, as the Megamachine's ability to offer people prospects for the future diminishes, so does faith in its myth. Ideological cohesion — what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci referred to as "cultural hegemony" — is increasingly visibly crumbling.

The second, even more important limitation is based on the fact that the Megamachine is part of a larger global system on which it depends: the biosphere of planet Earth. We are already witnessing how the almost explosive growth of the Megamachine is colliding with the limits of this global system. Although these limits can be extended to a certain degree, they are not infinite.

The combination of ecological and social dislocations produces an extraordinarily complex and chaotic dynamic, and in principle, it is impossible to predict where this process will lead. However, it is clear that a profound systemic upheaval is inevitable and has, in part, already begun. This is not just a matter of overcoming neoliberalism or replacing certain technologies (although both are necessary); it is a transformation that goes to the very foundations of our civilisation. The question is not whether this transformation will take place – it undoubtedly will, whether we like it or not – but how it will take place and in what direction it will develop.

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In the history of humanity, the Megamachine is not the first system to fail, but it is the largest, the most complex — and the most devastating. It has created an arsenal of weapons with destructive power hitherto unknown, and is already damaging the great systems that sustain life on Earth—namely, the climate system, plant and animal life, soils, forests, oceans, rivers, and aquifers—in ways that threaten its own existence. Industrial civilisation has already triggered the greatest extinction of species since the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. At the same time, impending climate chaos threatens to render entire regions of the Earth uninhabitable and massively exacerbate conflicts. The question of how and where the transformation will take place is therefore a matter of life and death for a large part of the world's population. The nature and development of systemic transformation will determine what kind of world we and our descendants will live in during the second half of this century: a world even more marked by misery and violence than the current one, or a world that is more respectful of life and freer. In this context, the growing instability of the global system is creating an extraordinary situation in which even relatively small movements can have a major influence on the entire process and its outcomes. This can be good or bad news. The rapid rise of fundamentalist and far-right movements, as well as the increase in tendencies towards a police state, show that it is also possible for totalitarian forces to take over the economic and political structures that are in the process of collapsing. In this situation, the future depends on all of us. Remaining spectators of the spectacle is not an option, as even inaction or passivity is a decision that will help determine the outcome of history.

The End of the Megamachine, Zero Books, 2020.

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